DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 372 260 CE 066 876

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TITLE Adult Literacy Programs: Guidelines for Effectiveness.
INSTITUTION Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC. Office of Research.
REPORT NO OR-94-3048
PUB DATE Jul 94
NOTE 35p.
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adult Basic Education; Adult Learning; *Adult Literacy; *Adult Students; Basic Skills; Classroom Environment; Classroom Techniques; Guidelines; Instructional Effectiveness; Instructional Materials; *Literacy Education; Program Development; Program Implementation; Student Characteristics; *Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

This report is a summary of information from both research and experience about the assumptions and practices that guide successful basic skills programs. The 31 guidelines are basic to building a solid foundation on which effective instructional programs for adults can be developed. The first six guidelines address some important characteristics of the adult learner, including understand that adults with learning needs do not necessarily want instruction, accept the learner's fear of failure, watch for early signs of trouble, and be realistic in expectations. The next 11 guidelines provide a variety of smart strategies for organizing program operations and services: get to know the target population, maintain a proactive marketing strategy, try to reverse learners' negative association with learning, make learning a positive experience, make the program and community interdependent, make programs physically and emotionally accessible, and continuously assess the program. Fourteen guidelines suggest some proven techniques for effective instruction, such as recognize importance of learners' acceptance of a shared role, help learners think of themselves as resources, encourage short-term goals, vary and individualize instruction, think family literacy, watch for handicapping conditions, think technology, choose instructional staff carefully, use volunteers to best advantage, and acknowledge adult literacy programs are hard but rewarding work. A 36-item bibliography is appended. (YLB)

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Adult Literacy Programs

Guidelines for Effectiveness

Office of Research
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
U.S. Department of Education

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Introduction

Adult literacy has become a public issue, and the attendant publicity suggests that adult literacy programs are thriving all across the nation. In fact, programs being planned and those already established to help adults develop their basic skills face very serious challenges. Due to excessive program goals, insufficient funds, high dropout rates, administrative and organizational burdens, or staff isolation and burnout, every year many new and ongoing programs go out of business. Since fewer than 5 percent of the estimated population of adults with literacy needs receive any kind of instructional help, and the majority of those who do enroll in a program make very modest progress in acquiring adequate skills, more and better programs are needed.

This report is a summary of information from both research and experience about the assumptions and practices that guide successful basic skills programs. The guidelines are neither exhaustive nor absolute, but they are considered basic to building a solid foundation on which effective instructional programs for adults can be developed. The following guidelines address first some important characteristics of the adult learner, then provide a variety of smart strategies for organizing program operations and services, and finally suggest some proven techniques for effective instruction. Most of the guidelines apply to workplace and English as a second language (ESL) programs as well, but such programs are sufficiently distinct to deserve additional comment elsewhere.

Adult Learners

The *National Adult Literacy Survey shows that adults with literacy problems seriously overestimate their skill levels, and that their number is far larger than was thought. The sheer size of this population magnifies the challenge of what Eberle and Robinson, two prominent adult educators, wrote in 1980: "We have been reminded of the uniqueness of each one, of the abilities they have, as well as the skills they lack; of their rough or highly sophisticated ways of coping. . . of the intensely individual and vulnerable aspirations that accompany each person's hope and effort to become literate; and of the unique accommodations each has made to the limitations of opportunity and damaged self-esteem incurred by one who is helpless where others are competent" (p. xi).*

Understand that adults with learning needs do not necessarily want instruction.

Most adults who are learning basic skills are voluntary learners, but some are required to participate in a program, for example, as a condition of eligibility for public financial assistance. They are not necessarily happy about it. Yet many social service organizations, and some providers of adult literacy programs, assume that all adults who need basic skills are equally ready and willing to acquire them. On the contrary, the greater their need for literacy development, the more likely that adults will not want to join a program.

Encourage learners to let their families and friends know of their participation in an adult literacy program.

Do not encourage a learner to stay "hidden" from family and peers. A popular stereotype represents an adult learning basic skills as a solitary figure who struggles in embarrassment and secrecy and who needs to be kept hidden. Embarrassed secrecy is not uncommon for these learners, but most of them belong to social networks whose members may not only be aware of the individual's problem, but may be, consciously or unconsciously, helping that individual cope with the literacy demands of daily life, even to the extent of performing some literacy tasks for them. When adults come forward and try to engage in a program, hiding that fact in embarrassed silence works against them. Surprisingly, visibility can contribute significantly to an adult learner's success. Effective literacy programs build on this social advantage by promoting the visibility of adult learners' goals among their families and friends, who can encourage them. The more adult learners see that they are learning within a "community," the much more likely they will

succeed. For some, however, success in learning can result in social isolation if their success means that they no longer fit into their milieu. Programs must prepare the learner to face this risk.

Recognize why the adult has enrolled in a literacy program.

The single most persistent and powerful documented motivator for enrolling in a literacy program is the learner's desire to get a job. Due to the more limited job opportunities, this is somewhat less true for rural learners. For nonnative speakers, the strongest motivation is to learn to speak English. For all groups, the other most powerful motivation comes from their desire to teach and help their children. These main motivators should dictate the content and methods of instruction. For example, reading job advertisements and manuals; creating job ads and posters; using real-life materials such as driver's license applications and manuals, health care instructions, and medicine labels; and practicing reading aloud all respond to the learner's practical goals.

Accept the adult learner's fear of failure.

Nonnative speakers in literacy programs usually fear the unknown, whereas native speakers fear a repeat of past failures. Most other learners may also be afraid of making mistakes, but they are usually enthusiastic about their goals, especially when they have chosen those goals themselves; however this is not so of the basic skills learners. Despite stories in the media dramatizing their desire and opportunities for learning, adults usually do not enter basic skills programs either convinced they are doing the right thing or committed to stay. No matter how instructionally sound a program may be, no matter how sincere and motivated its staff, the learners usually continue to feel very

tentative. Accepting the potential impact on learning of the learner's fear of failure and developing strategies to counteract its effects are two of the greatest challenges any program faces.

Watch for the early signs of trouble.

A great many adults with basic skills needs already have low self-esteem. To compensate for this, they often overcompensate by developing unrealistic goals and expecting a powerful payoff early in the program. They also have a higher-than-average tendency to be overpowered quickly by frustration, worry, competing demands, or a sense of impending failure. Such feelings often surface very early in the program and, if ignored, can quickly lead to the learner's withdrawal from the program. But such feelings can be dealt with very effectively if they are recognized and if staff help the learner to neutralize them.

Be realistic in your expectations of learner staying power and progress.

Many programs offer an adult two or three one-hour classes a week; at that rate, it will take a learner a few years to make significant progress. Because that is too long for many adults, dropout rates of 50–75 percent are not unusual. Programs can counteract their dropout potential by increasing instructional hours and, even more important, by helping the learner set just one or two limited goals that can be achieved in a short period of time. Short-range goals help accelerate learning and thus provide the chance for early satisfaction. The longer range the goal, the more likely only a small percentage of learners will persist. A year seems the limit for most.

Programs

Every effective program has a point of view about the problems of literacy, program goals, and the people it serves. Carmen Hunter once said that the way to help adults learn is to work beside them, not by doing something to them or for them. For, as Eberle and Robinson remind us, a literacy problem is "a wel of problems, some inherited from an older generation, some being passed on to the next. Daily life is a finger-in-the-dike operation at best, a zigzag from crisis to crisis"(page 22). Effective programs see the whole learner in context and respond to as many aspects of the learner's life and needs as capacity allows.

A very small percentage of all the adults in this nation who have literacy problems seek or find meaningful help. When they do, it is provided through a wide variety of programs, from the long-established through the just-starting. Quality, effectiveness, and permanence are not always assured: even programs with the highest motivations can find themselves troubled and confounded. At the heart of every program's point of view is a concept of learning success surrounded by a provision of support.

Get to know your target population.

The more closely the program is tied to the needs of the community the better it serves the community and the better its chances of survival. State and city agencies often have a lot of valuable information about the community, and they should be contacted early on. They have proven to be useful and loyal friends. Census counts or phone surveys are also helpful. The use of former program participants and community members as "ambassadors of good will" is an effective way to get consumer-based answers to such vital questions as: What is the range of socioeconomic and education levels? What minority and ethnic groups form part of the community? What size are they? What are the overall economic outlook, the high school dropout rate, and the kinds and numbers of unemployed in the area? What skills do employers need, but do not find? Who are the area's leaders and what are the organizational resources, the active community groups and centers? What are the major health problems and the substance abuse, crime, and delinquency rates? The answers to all these questions constitute not only a portrait but also a realistic basis on which to design or redesign the program in order to fit it to the characteristics of the community.

Maintain a proactive marketing strategy.

Effective programs never rest on their laurels. Often enough adults seek help to keep programs full and some programs, especially the ESL programs, have waiting lists. Under these conditions, little marketing is required to keep them full. But some programs have to solicit learners very actively, and these programs must market their services through a variety of means. For

programs that would benefit from advertising, given the target audience's literacy needs, the message should be heard rather than read. Studies of media use show radio and tv spots to be the most effective for this purpose, but the best publicity of all is word-of-mouth, especially from former students who have benefitted from the program. Whether they are volunteers or hired for this task, they can be used effectively to sell the program in their own neighborhoods and among their friends and fellow workers.

Try to reverse learners' negative association with learning.

Think carefully about the look and feel of the program's location. In some neighborhoods, the local school is a safe and popular place, and adults welcome the chance to be there. The atmosphere of the program is all important. Recreating a school, especially an elementary school, can cause negative recollections and reactions on the part of learners. Many family literacy programs do in fact take place quite happily in school buildings and during school hours, a choice dictated by the involvement of children in the programs. But since, for a variety of reasons, many adult learners associate school with negative experiences keeping a program out of an elementary or secondary school can help distance the program from these negative associations. On the other hand, adults tend to like taking classes in a community college or other higher education institution, especially when the look, feel, and operation of the program are personal and relatively noninstitutional.

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Be prepared to make some fundamental changes in order to make learning a positive experience.

The challenge of making learning a positive experience can have unexpected results. For instance, two Appalachian community colleges were experiencing a very high loss of potential students among adult applicants to their preprofessional literacy development programs. Through personal interviews and surveys, the colleges discovered that many of these applicants found the schools so formal, impersonal, and unyielding that they decided not to complete the admissions process. In view of this, the colleges overhauled everything in that process, starting with the very first step—the publicity—then the intake system, and the support services. They learned how to put the adult learner first. This meant retraining the college staff in the realities of adults with literacy needs; rewriting all materials for better readability levels; using more radio and television than print advertisements to market their programs; and changing the admissions process by adding individualized support services every step of the way. The number completing the admissions process went up some 40 percent. Then the colleges turned to the problems of keeping those admitted enrolled!

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Make the program and the community interdependent.

Programs that take firm root in the social and business structure of their communities have much greater success. They are built on continuous outreach, telling the immediate and the greater community what they are doing. Effective programs involve individuals from a wide range of organizations, agencies, businesses, and institutions in their governing and advisory boards and as volunteers. They establish cooperative projects and

liaisons with local agencies and organizations. Effective programs think in terms of their community every day, often in at least two languages. And they go one smart step further: they build in strength and wisdom by involving past and present learners in their management.

Make programs physically accessible to adult learners, including disabled learners.

When programs can choose their location and their space, they try to make their programs physically accessible to adult learners, including disabled learners. Programs should be centrally located in their community—libraries and community centers are favorites—at places close to the intersection of major transportation routes. Given the variety of adult learners' schedules, programs should be as flexible in their hours as money, staff, and transportation allow. Think twice, however, before adopting an open-door policy. Efforts to make a program accessible can sometimes prove troublesome. Allowing learners to enter the program at any point seems like a reasonable and democratic move designed to take full advantage of the applicant's enthusiasm and availability. But to accommodate an open-door policy, sufficient money and energy as well as staff, materials, and space are needed, and most programs do not have enough of them. Many programs that try an open-door policy adjust back to what they can manage well or, having raised learners' expectations too high, fold.

Make programs emotionally accessible to learners.

The emotional goals of improved self-esteem and confidence are every bit as important as the instructional goals and are often achieved more successfully. Emotional access begins before learners get to the program, when they first

hear about it. It continues at the door in a spirit of warm welcome and respect. It persists in the classroom in recognition of the importance of establishing a balance between the learner's need to be independent and the need to learn from and with others.

Help learners with problems they face outside the classroom.

Adult learners are faced with all kinds of challenges and diversions, mostly from their home environment, that can wreak havoc with their goals and intentions. Programs should have a strong referral system with many different community resources that can help learners with their problems. If program funds and personnel allow, the more services the program can offer or arrange through local agencies and organizations, the better. Child care, personal and employment counseling, and help in contacting social agencies and services, and even potential employers add greatly to learners' ability to get to the program and focus on their instructional goals. However important the provision of services, it must always be seen as a means to reaching learning goals. For example, aggressively keeping track of those enrolled in the program helps: when learners start missing class, phone calls to ask after them or notes or postcards of concern are known to improve markedly retention rates in programs.

Consider expanding the program's goals.

Some programs that start modestly with a limited number of goals find within the first few years that they are coping very well. This is a time to consider expanding. If money and staff requirements are manageable, a program can achieve maximum impact by enlarging its mission. For example, the Jobs Training Partnership Act-affiliated Atlantic City, New Jersey Youth

Corps Program for ages 16–25 goes beyond the norm. It provides a range of remediation, counseling, group interaction, and job training services designed to help improve learners' quality of life. This program concentrates on everything from exploration of personal values to basic skills to work habits and behavior. Demanding a strong commitment from the learner, the program has had marked success.

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Keep your eye on money.

The most recurrent theme in adult basic skills programs is financial health: the constant need for money, the search for more, and money management. Since many programs are funded through diverse sources, both private and public, they cannot take continuous funding for granted. For these programs, every day is a new opportunity to expand the circle of those who care about and support the program. And for many program directors, fundraising is by itself a full-time job. They have often been ingenious in devising new ways to solicit financial support. For example, one Baltimore program, which usually has night coffees and such annual events as a bowling fundraiser, took advantage of the visit of a tall ship and gave a very successful party aboard. Most activities are not so glamorous: An Illinois program invites local business executives once a month for a simple breakfast and a chance to visit the program and learn what is in progress. Many programs get business people to help devise their money management process. Ultimately, however, there is nothing more effective for the financial health of the program than the satisfaction of the learners. The more obvious that satisfaction, the better. Satisfied adult learners are not only the best source of new clientele, but the most persuasive reason for supporting the program.

Continuously assess the program.

The programs that persist keep a clear and honest eye on themselves. Use evaluation experts or outside focus groups and former program participants to help you develop and carry out a yearly process of program evaluation. Share your good news and your deficiencies broadly. The program that keeps at the challenge of improving itself usually keeps learners happy and retains the most and the best friends. But there is another possible result: the way a program goes about assessing its quality can greatly influence the way funding agencies define the quality and success they expect a program to have, and how they establish measurable performance standards.

Instruction

Teaching basic skills effectively is every bit as hard as learning them. Most people who teach adults basic skills have developed their ability through the trial and error of experience. This will continue in the foreseeable future. These guidelines provide the wisdom gained by many over time; they show how important it is that instruction be geared to learners' interests and that it take place within a program focused as much as possible on supporting the learner. Learning to read, for example, is usually very hard work, taking years rather than days, and so instruction must also be based in some acceptance of reality. When specific and realistic goals are set, learners know success right away when they experience it.

18

Recognize the importance to the instructional plan of learners' acceptance of a shared role.

Most participants in basic skills programs tend to do better when they feel they are sharing the responsibility of learning with their instructors. When they do so, their instructors increasingly expect them to help and tutor each other, and to take a very active role in choosing what they want to learn and in using and designing materials. Teacher-centered classrooms, on the other hand, which detractors accuse of fostering passivity and dependency, tend to work better with adults who feel more comfortable in a highly structured context, where an authority figure consistently takes the lead in setting goals and objectives. Many adults with basic skills needs do not feel they can control much in their lives. They must be taught how to take control of their own learning and that there is a reward for doing so. Those who have a much greater sense of owning their own learning seem to persist more than others in achieving their goals.

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Help the learners think of themselves as rich resources.

Adults with basic skills needs often think of themselves as deficient or see themselves in some other negative terms. Start the course by giving them every opportunity to talk about what they know and to show what they can do, no matter how indirectly related to the anticipated instructional content. Make it clear that all adult learners come to a program enriched in many and various ways, with a range of experience and skills they themselves either do not recognize or downplay. Explain that they should seize every opportunity to draw upon their knowledge and experience in their learning, a major advantage few of them will realize they have.

20

Encourage short-term goals.

Learners need to develop specific, workable instructional goals so that there can be immediate results. Being able to say "I can read these signs now" or "I'll be able to read all these directions in a few weeks" is far better for morale than having to wait a year or more to be able to say, "Now I can read at the (fifth)-grade level." Most adult learners do not want to express their learning goals in terms of elementary school grade levels, and instructors should honor their preference.

21

Accept the idea that one-on-one tutoring may not always be the ideal or even the preferred method of instruction.

While one-on-one tutoring can be an answer to one learner's needs, it can be a source of failure for the next. Its effectiveness usually depends on the competence of the instructor, the length and quality of the instructor's training, and the nature of the relationship between instructor and learner. One-on-one instruction has the great advantages of individualizing the pace, style, and content of learning, and of providing plenty of room for emotional support. But it can also promote too great a dependency in the learner. And for some it is too removed from the normal social situation: it focuses attention, and thus pressure, on the learner, and does not include the interaction with peers or the visible tie to a greater learning community that many adult learners need.

22

Vary and individualize instruction to maintain interest.

Adult learners get bored easily. One basic way to individualize instruction is to find out how a particular adult learns best. Some learn visually, some aurally, some by trying to write as much down as possible of what is talked about in class. If the instructor can help the learner discover a preferred learning style, the easier it will be to develop or use materials that fit that preferred style. Would a drawing help more than writing? A tape recording? Would a simple software program teach each step better? Frequently the learner can help develop some of these materials and, since the act of creating them is itself a stimulus, learner-produced materials, no matter how basic, are greatly encouraged. In the final analysis, focusing the instruction to appeal to the eye, the ear, or the hand can save the learner time and energy, and increase greatly the learner's concentration on the skills under development.

23

Choose instructional materials for greatest personal impact.

While adult learners want to work with materials that reflect their lives and experiences, the background of some instructors leads them to choose basal readers and children's texts. This inappropriate choice usually kills the learner's interest. The best materials are those that adults have reason to use or think about in real life, including materials they create themselves about their own lives. Autobiographies are always very popular and very effective. Materials about families, workplace tasks, medical care and medicines, sports and hobbies, and even copies of test manuals for different licenses and certificates are all geared to personal lives. Existing materials should be

pretested for readability levels and adjusted accordingly, so the learner can deal with them readily.

Integrate program services with instructional goals.

Many programs use materials from the workplace as the basis for learning to read. For example, working on reading a real-life manual being used by the employees at some local companies greatly focuses the learner's attention and interest. To heighten learners' chances of getting a job, provide a wide variety of job-related activities: developing puzzles using names of local products or services; reading classified ads from the local paper and posters and bulletin board sheets from local workplaces; working through the descriptions of available on-site workplace training programs. The same variety can be applied to any theme or interest that learners think is central to their lives.

Think family literacy.

Adults often want to upgrade their basic skills in order to be able to teach their children. Some programs take advantage of this motivation by designing an instructional program that includes parents, children, and instructors. Such programs often take place in schools during school hours. Preliminary findings from parent-child instructional programs show not only some significant gains in skills, but also notable increases in the amount and kinds of parental involvement with the children's school and school-related activities. This involvement represents a major bonus of the program.

Remember that most adult learners are shy about tests.

The more formal and formidable the test, the more gun-shy adult learners are. Emphasize the use of assessments as progress reports, not score cards. Since assessments are chances for learners to see where they have been and where they are going, learners should be encouraged early in the program to think of tests, not as rather intimidating assessments, but as friendly feedback. Since the use of standardized tests has been found to present some serious problems, programs that are not required to use them as a condition of funding may wish to consider more informal and briefer kinds of assessments. In any case, for best results the use of standardized tests should take place only after the learner has had a chance to get used to the program and the instructor. Help learners arrive at realistic expectations for themselves by using assessments to recognize their own strengths and the areas that need development. Emphasize the temporary nature of many of the limitations learners may feel. The lower learners are on the skills scale, the more important user-friendly assessments are to their progress. The Gateway Program, pioneered by the Philadelphia Mayor's Office for Literacy, and "A Day in Your Life," soon available from the National Center on Adult Literacy, structure the procedure by which a program greets, meets, engages, and informally tests a learner. They make the process smooth, agreeable, and informative.

Standardized tests do have a role to play. They can be quite useful with much more advanced students, who are less threatened by more formal assessment measures. Their use in pre-test and post-test achievement measures also usually satisfies the program's need to provide state funding sources with evidence of individual accomplishment. Nevertheless, it is generally agreed

that standardized tests should not be used as the basis for any major entry/exit decisions.

Watch for vision and hearing problems and learning disabilities.

Program staff should be sensitive to the possibility that some of the learners will have undiagnosed or untreated vision and hearing problems, which are often very serious. Watch also for the presence of learning disabilities, which are more prevalent among adults who need basic skills development. Some experts think that 50 percent or more of such adults have learning disabilities. The problem: most basic skills assessments, and almost all instructors doing the assessing, are not able to identify these problems. Diagnosis requires that the instructor or evaluator be able to trace patterns of errors, and this requires thorough training in the procedures. Those who develop assessment instruments are therefore increasingly sensitive to the widespread presence of learning disabilities, and are devising instruments accordingly, such as the Screening Test for Adults with Learning Disabilities. Despite the availability of more refined tests, the decision to keep an adult with a learning disability in the program depends on the severity of the problem, the ability of the instructor to manage it, and the availability of outside resources, which are seriously lacking in many rural areas. Whenever possible, it is usually better to refer the adults out to programs or persons equipped to address their needs.

28

Think technology.

Most adults are fascinated with the idea, if not the actual management, of machines. Once past the introductory jitters, they quickly come to enjoy using instructional technology. Television programs teaching basic skills can dramatize the use of skills both aurally and visually in such a variety of ways as to facilitate and intensify the learner's engagement. Learners can gain the satisfaction of an emotional identification by seeing that other adults also experience difficulty and success in learning. But it is the computer and the endless possibilities of computer software that are the greatest individualized resource for basic skills instruction, since they not only provide a rich variety of instructional content and methods, but also increase the amount of time a learner spends on skills development. For example, some computer programs are designed for instructors developing individualized study programs. The STAR program does just this, and also provides application modules so learners can practice transferring skills into other real-life contexts. Overall, the evidence shows that computerized basic skills programs tend to speed up learning dramatically, with computer-based learning groups taking no more than 25 hours to do what it takes traditional learning groups up to 150 hours to do.

Though computers are endlessly patient, resourceful, and nonjudgmental, especially in helping adults do drills and variations in practice, they are expensive to get and to maintain. Likewise, much of the software is self-instructional and self-paced, and is often expensive. However, given the enormous number of personal computers being discarded every week throughout the United States, it should not be too hard for most programs to solicit used computers as donations from local businesses and to befriend those capable of repairing them. This effort makes sense not only from an

instructional but from an administrative point of view: computers help programs track student progress, keep records and lists, and do financial accounting. With these advantages in mind, if no staff member is tuned in to the instructional possibilities of computers, a program director often wants to hire someone who is, or looks for volunteers.

29

Choose the instructional staff very carefully.

The quality and characteristics of the staff will of course depend upon supply and the amount of money available to pay them. Programs want to find women and men who have personalities that attract and hold learners. Patience, acceptance, a sense of humor, caring, and dedication are very important. An interest or skill in instructional technology would also be an advantage. Because of cost constraints, programs usually try to use both paid and volunteer teachers. Given the complexity of adult literacy instruction, it would be best if all instructors could have a strong background in adult learning. But many of the professional teachers of adult learners come from or are retired from public school systems, and very few are trained as adult educators. Even if trained adult educators could be found, most programs could not afford them.

30

Use volunteers to best advantage.

Volunteers are a valuable and inevitable part of adult literacy programs, and perform so many different tasks that most programs would not survive without them. Their use as tutors can pose problems. The training they receive, usually from national adult literacy organizations with long experience in this kind of training, tends nevertheless to be of limited length and scope, and its effectiveness is sometimes doubted. Programs often must

make a major effort to get but a few volunteer tutors, and the turnover rate within a year tends to be high. To combat this trend, some programs make sure that volunteer instructors benefit from an internship period in which they associate regularly with more experienced instructors. Ongoing evaluative feedback and opportunities for peer socialization and peer tutoring also help strengthen tutors' effectiveness and commitment.

Acknowledge that adult literacy programs are hard, but rewarding, work.

Every year some adult literacy programs, founded on little more than the desire to help adults learn basic skills, go out of business. The fundamental fact of adult literacy programs is that they are very challenging, very time consuming, often frustrating, and sometimes unappreciated. Teaching and learning basic skills are rarely easy for adults, and often very painful. They can take a toll on learner and instructor alike and on program staff. Hard work is central to making these guidelines work for your program. The results for everyone can be not only satisfying but also thrilling.

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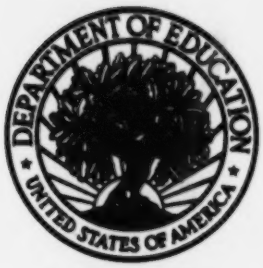

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